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The Role of the Media In Reporting Medical News

The media, electronic and print, needs to gain the public's attention in order to sell its goods. It therefore tends to sensationalize information in order to reach its respective audiences. Sometimes the sensationalism goes too far and although the media tends to be generally responsible, it can present, on occasion, an unbalanced viewpoint to its constituents. Medicine and health-related matters are of major interest to the public, and anytime new breakthroughs occur, the media tends to give wide exposure to such occurrences. Over the past years, several inconsistencies in the media's reporting of medical events prompts me to write this editorial.

In the past, one of our local newspapers, *The Scottsdale Progress*, was extremely inconsistent in its editorial policy regarding the building of a peripheral hospital in one of the expanding outlying northern communities. An initial editorial supported the development of the hospital. It subsequently wrote an additional editorial condemning the hospital board for building the hospital in that location once the extremely low occupancy rate was apparent and hospital system rates had to be increased to cover the loss suffered by this new hospital. The editorial board in that situation was unfair to its readers, but more importantly was not responsible in its position. A more thoughtful balanced approach in its editorial policy would have presented both sides of the story initially and allowed the community to reach its own decisions before the hospital was built.

Pancreatic transplantation gained wide publicity when several patients in the Valley underwent this experimental procedure. The one-sided presentation of "a breakthrough" on TV and the *Arizona Republic*

gave false hope to patients with the disorder, and I think it did more disservice than good to its constituents. Rather than obtaining information from others not intimately involved with the transplantation process as to the possible adverse side effects and longterm viability of such transplants, the media chose to just present the positive upbeat side of the story.

The media and the medical profession have an uncomfortable relationship. The media needs the medical profession for its expertise, but at the same time distrusts to some extent the medical profession because of its possible bias in presenting the scientific information. The media embroils itself in controversial issues without really knowing the players or the powers. Many times in the process the media gets polarized and does not present a balanced position. I think the media in its attempt to generate headlines sometimes doesn't do its homework to the extent necessary to fully understand the issues involved. Responsible journalism requires responsible reporters and editors who demand to know the whole story, not just a portion. Consistency by the editorial board, whether it be a newspaper or a television station, is essential for the well-being of the community in which it purports to serve. Rather than give itself awards for electronic and printed excellence, the information media should be judged by outside forces which make the news and perhaps have a better understanding of the complexity of the issues involved. "Letters to the editors," the subsequent retractions and caveats do not balance the big headlines and bold type or verbal hype that precede many of these sensational stories. Perhaps an outside panel composed of consumer advocates, medical, legal and other professionals in various walks of life, should be judging the media's presentation. ■

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